

About the notion of Place

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What are artists and researchers of contemporary art looking for in the tumulus of Montecalvario? What is there to see, what to read and how to listen to their artworks exhibited at the Archaeological Museum of Castellina in Chianti?

The art of our time often works with what might be called a «radical contemporaneity», a current practice that pushes the figure of the artist to respond to the claim of diffusion and immediate exhibition of the work produced, becoming in fact one of the actors of this global society so post-modern as to be self-referential and entirely focused on efficiency. The great art shows, but also museums and art centres, offer exhibitions for a more or less informed and therefore expert audience. From a point of view of contemporary art history it becomes an interesting paradox, precisely because this contemporary radicalism seems to increasingly separate the reception of the work from the experience of surprise and from that figure that Marcel Duchamp called le *regardeur*: that individual, the person expressed in the singular, that does not look at the artwork as an ordinary object shown behind a window display, but as a mystery, an opaque place that exposes the person to the uncertainty of his own gaze.

About Inexperience

At the beginning of the last century, Duchamp as well as Francis Picabia and other artists, produced objects totally extraneous to the museums of their time and therefore incomprehensible to any spectator. They felt that not understanding, not being able to see the radically foreign object that stands in front of us is a necessary approach to activate an own inner world with the intelligence and sensitivity of the individual person.

For these artists, the expert, the one who is at ease in a contemporary art museum, has the distracted gaze of someone who is already present to himself without having to make any effort to adapt to a context. A context that is supposed to be known *a priori*, and that is therefore no longer to be questioned. The expert is conscious of his own position in a museum, like someone who looks at the shop windows in a mall, immediately finding the point of view that puts him at ease in front of the merchandise displayed to his gaze. To be in position, or to put oneself in perspective, to use a term of Renaissance painting, means to have a point of view and therefore to precede without any effort to the language of the object or of the artwork that still has to be discovered. As soon as he enters, the expert projects himself into the correct attitude of a reader. Without effort or special attention, he can evaluate what he observes. Everything is fluid because everything is already assumed to be a language. As we all do in front of a window of a store, the expert observes which shoe fits his foot better without the need to question the device that makes it visible. The expert does not question the context, as we all no longer question the device of a mall or of a large supermarket.

The Duchampian *regardeur* is, unlike the expert, deprived of any certainty. The inexperienced spectator is placed into the position of an observer, trying to perceive, not the object that he still cannot identify as the thing to look at, but the device that organizes and directs the look. The non-expert is facing something entirely unknown. Even before he sees it, he has to understand if looking in a certain way can work. Just like children do when they play pretend, the inexperienced beholder tries to identify the way the device is functioning starting thus from other things that are known to him. To look at a video setup, for example, sitting as if we were at home watching a movie on a screen, can be a good starting point to discover an object, that only at a later stage and from this first imperfect position will become visible. It will ultimately be nothing like the films that we already know, thus opening the experience to a completely new object. But in other cases, it could be better to start looking at the object as if you were looking at a tree, or a wreck, an insect, a landscape, or a car engine. In any case the *regardeur* has to get into position before finding the key that opens his eyes to the device and then, in a second step, to the exhibited work.

If we follow through Marcel Duchamp's reasoning, we can say that the inexperienced spectator participates in the construction of the artwork that he has in front of him ¹. In the moment, a timeframe radically contemporary to the gaze, the work is built under the activation of the gaze itself. The *regardeur* begins to see because he finds a starting point in the schemes and in the experiences he has gained, that is not sufficient to evaluate the exhibited object. Compared to previous experiences, which are activated and become vivid, although insufficient to see and evaluate the new object, that which remains unknown arouses interest. This is the form of a radically new experience. The *regardeur*, unlike the expert, can build new connections where there was nothing beforehand. The *regardeur* is ready to experience something precisely because, contrary to the expert, he does not only see the object but also discovers its place.

About Time

The artists exhibiting their works at the Archaeological Museum of Chianti Senese are part of a group of artists and theoreticians who founded, fifteen years ago, one of the first research units in art. It would perhaps be more correct to speak of a research unit for art: a type of research that is intended to improve knowledge about contemporary art by the means of art practice. The research unit Contemporary Art and Historical Temporalities of the Academy of Fine Arts of Lyon (Art contemporain et temps de l'histoire – ENSBA Lyon) has been working for years on the complex phenomena of the experience of time and the paradoxes of historical construction. In their research, artworks are studied as one of the forms of language, which in contact with revolutionary or catastrophic historical moments, such as in the Western world the two world wars of the twentieth century and their destruction, opened our gaze to new perceptual abilities. Where the times of the past, present and future seem to have

¹ "The artwork demands both poles [...] I give even more importance to the *regardeur* than to the artist." (L'œuvre d'art exige les deux pôles [...] j'attache même plus d'importance au *regardeur* qu'à l'artiste.) Marcel Duchamp, in a series of 4 interviews by Georges Charbonnier for the broadcast *Entretien avec* on France Culture in 1960.

become invisible or irreconcilable, art has produced a new way to reopen the experience to temporality.

The interest in Duchamp's work was born from the discovery that the objects called «Machinist Works», objects that were absolutely incomprehensible in a museum of that time, were produced between 1913 and 1919, exactly during the years of World War I. Without going into too much detail about our past research ², it can generally be said that a historical break produces a leap in the perception of time thus inventing a new language. What seems essential in this context, is that perhaps while exhibiting in Castellina in Chianti, we are also living a moment of rupture in the history of our culture. The technical evolution, associated with the predominance of the financial aspect of the contemporary world, has produced a rupture, not only in the way we are telling our story and seeing our future, but also in the physical reality of the world that our activities are radically changing. Without going into social changes in our communities, or atmospheric changes for the globe, we can say that our relationship to past and future temporalities seems to be suspended. We are at a stage where the past can no longer be used as an example and the future seems absolutely unpredictable.

Time is out joint, says Hamlet in Shakespeare's play.

Perhaps it is just so: the pivot that allowed the rotation and the order in the time of modern progress of the post-war Western world is now broken. Perhaps our society has no more possibility of progress and is for the first time reduced to a radically contemporary reality. If history was essential in the choice of paths to take and in the understanding of the current language in the past world of industrious nations — just think how our education is based on classical literature — today we find nothing more than information about the present fed by prosthetics and machines that only analyse and calculate current data. But it is also true for the future, that past and remote cultures carefully analysed to understand the present. The art of haruspicy, the essential inspiration of almost all the artworks shown in this exhibition, was an Etruscan culture of foresight. It was about reading the future in the entrails of

² The list of books published by the research unit is at the bottom of this catalogue.

sacrificed animals or in the flight of birds in order to understand how to act in the present.

The historian François Hartog called this time without root or perspective «presentism»³. To reopen time whose axis is out of joint, means to open up a new perceptual dimension; to see temporal depth where there was only a radical contemporaneity before. It is for this reason that the artists, gathered here, are interested to reach the unexperimented spectator, the one who does not yet have a point of view and therefore finds himself digging into the very moment of experience to produce a new timeframe. The exhibition is built for somebody who, without prejudice, would know how to create new bonds in the place of memory and in the past and present time of his experience. Precisely because he does not yet know how to deal with his gaze, the present-day spectator, the one who is suspended in a present time, has to invent the object he is looking at.

About the Place

Here, the invention can be a simple personal question, especially if it is meant in the context of the singular gaze of the *regardeur*. Inventing where one does not see, nor understand. Yet the verb to «invent» in its Latin etymology comes from «invenire» which means coming over, or in, something, to find, to meet. In this sense, the moment of discovery is an invention. And it is this specific term that is being used in archaeology. The archaeologist *invents* the site, in the sense that he «comes in», by re-finding objects and traces. But finding things hidden under the surface of the ground is not enough. Like the inexperienced *regardeur*, the archaeologist is in front of something radically unknown. He cannot define the place of his discovery unless he *invents* the site, if he does not give new meaning to disparate and dispersed signs, to historical documents and documentary sources, finding literally the connections and the trajectory that unites and gives meaning to all the things that have been found. The

³ François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2003. Translated by Saskia Brown, François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity. Presentism and Experiences of Time*, Columbia University Press, 2016.

archaeologist does not find treasures wrapped in the mystery and aura of the ancient, as the romantic Schliemann did at the end of the nineteenth century, believing he had found the treasure of Priam. The archaeologist does not dig to bring the object to light, but digs to bring the place to the light. By removing layer by layer and extricating the material he studies, the archaeologist *invents*, he literally opens the site up to light. If we talk about invention in terms of archaeology we can understand an essential aspect that has led contemporary artists to exhibit in the museum of Castellina in Chianti. As in any museum of ancient art, the objects exhibited in the showcases of the Archaeological Museum of the Sieneese Chianti are organized according to the inventions that have been made through them. The showcases retrace the history of the sites and give a sense to traces that would otherwise be scattered. One who enters an archaeological museum always has the feeling of missing the place of the object observed. The invention appears only if one studies the objects, and looks at them in their relation to their site. And that is what matters to the artists. To exhibit contemporary objects in a context where the site is placed in the foreground. This experience is obvious in Castellina in Chianti where the museum is located a few steps away from the site of Montecalvario, site known since remote times and which was therefore literally robbed from all its precious objects before an archaeologist could organize the excavation and invent the place. After seeing the showcases in the museum and the reconstruction of the chariot, a visitor going into the tumulus will find nothing or almost nothing to see. What is to be seen is in the museum, but it is not simply a matter of seeing the lion's head, the remaining parts of metal and of the chariot, but the relationship between these objects and the place. It's about seeing the separate elements of something that was a coherent and organized whole before. In order to guess what the objects were in the context of the life and culture of that time, the spectator becomes *regardeur*. This is one of the essential points of this exhibition: to invent the place of the artwork. This is a complex operation that cannot be carried only by the artist. The viewer must make himself available to his own inexperience in order to also invent the object that he is observing and find its place.

The problem of the place reinstates the unique experience of the spectator as an essential moment of the exhibition of an artwork. However, it also poses the problem of creation to the author in new terms. The language of the artwork cannot simply be constructed from a set of grammatical and formal elements that would already be clearly identified. In this sense the artistic language would be solely focused on itself, on its own subject and inevitably be self-referential. The language of the artwork is also an invention, in the sense of *inventing* in archaeology. The language of an artwork does not tell something already structured, but it is built as a set of clues, of traces of open elements that can be organized only if the observer invents the site of the artwork and places it in his own experience and in relation to what he knows of the reality of the world. The inexperienced *regardeur* ventures as an archaeologist in a long relationship with an artwork that strikes him, because he finds himself inventing even if he has left the museum for a long time and is back to his own occupations. An artwork remains present precisely because who has seen it and who thinks and rethinks about it, has yet to finish to build the place that makes it evident, inscribed in the world and therefore significant.

Anne-Violaine Houcke, historian and theorist of cinema, saw in Pier Paolo Pasolini's work a paradigmatic example of the practice of invention and its theoretical reflection. If Pasolini produces a new type of face, body language, character typology and narrative of stories unknown to the literature and cinema of the post-war period, it is because he invents. «Pasolini gives us to see — as Anne Violaine-Houcke writes — and gives voice to those who disturb, those whose very existence contradicts the official version of an Italy of the miracle — that of the famous economic miracle. He invents them in the way Caravaggio did, inventing new types of people, of things, of lights, because he saw them in the light of reality: he saw those who the official ideology excluded from the great altarpieces, to the point that they could be assumed to have become invisible, *tout court*.⁴

⁴ Anne-Violaine Houcke, *Jux d'enfants: Les banlieues de Cecilia Mangini et Pasolini*, Revue Ballast.fr, online edition, http://www.revue-ballast.fr/cecilia-mangini/#_edn5

» Pasolini invents, intending the invention also in theoretical terms, as in the article he writes on the occasion of the *Caravaggio* edition by Longhi ⁵. Pasolini works as an artist who practices art but also thinks the theory and above all, which was always essential in his work, the responsibility of the artist toward the spectator or reader. We could say that Pasolini takes a particular look at his time, but he gives the viewer/reader the task of locating what he sees in the reality of the world of those years. The invention, Pasolini says, is the invention of the place, an influence on the context of what is given to see.

Rethinking the place means rethinking the temporality of our gaze and experience. Whether it is the artist in his studio or the inexperienced spectator, the work of inventing opens space to time and makes the distance between past and future critical, giving back depth and roots to time.

Translated by Marion Roche

⁵ Pier Paolo Pasolini, «La Luce di Caravaggio», *Saggi sulla letteratura e sull'arte*, Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude (dir.), Milano, Mondadori, pp. 2672-2674.